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Deceiving Ourselves

Americans Aren't Very Good at Disinformation

By David Ignatius

STATE Department spokesman Bernard Kalb resigned last week to protest his government's reported plan to use disinformation. Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov, surely no stranger to the world of disinformation, didn't.

That tells you two obvious but important things about official deception. Most of the world does it routinely, blandly, without compunction. The United States does it awkwardly, with a guilty conscience, and suffers enormous embarrassment when it gets caught. Both points are worth remembering: Most of the world routinely lies, and the United States doesn't—and shouldn't.

If you doubt that lying is a routine instrument of statecraft in most parts of the world, take a look at a study prepared last year by The Rand Corp. The study, ponderously titled "An Annotated Bibliography of the Open Literature on Deception," cites nearly 1,000 works about deception, from its use in China 2,500 years ago to modern times. A reader is left with the conclusion that in every age, in every part of the globe, clever generals and statesmen have used lies and deceit to confuse and confound their enemies, and sometimes their own people.

The Rand study was prepared under a contract from the Office of the Secretary of Defense. It's valuable because it helps explain how the Reagan administration stumbled into planning its own campaign of "disinformation" against Libya last August.

The Reagan administration and its conservative allies see America surrounded by a sea of disinformation. Among conservatives, analyzing Soviet *dezinformatsia* has become something of an academic sub-specialty, with Soviet-bloc detectors and American professors writing learned books on the subject. There is even a quarterly newsletter titled "Disinformation: Soviet Active Measures and Disinformation Forecast" to warn the

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unsuspecting reader about Moscow's disinformation targets.

Some of this material is downright silly. For example, the newsletter warns that Moscow's targets this month include the World Peace Congress opening in Copenhagen on Wednesday and U.N. Disarmament Week, starting Oct. 24. Next month, beware of the Helsinki Review Conference in Vienna, the U.N. International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People and—egad!—the U.S. congressional elections.

The wonderful thing about this list is that it takes events about which Americans would otherwise be completely oblivious—do you know anybody who is actually planning to attend the World Peace Congress, or who even knows what it is?—and makes them seem like serious and important events.

The disinformation specialists are ever-vigilant. Consider this warning about Soviet media plans from the winter 1986 issue of "Disinformation":

"Western media will be exploited by both overt and covert techniques. Increasing numbers of formal press conferences will be held by Soviet spokesmen; Soviet advertisements will be placed in major Western newspapers; and Soviet officials and 'journalists' will be made available for both on-the-air and off-the-air meetings with the Western media before, during and after the second Reagan-Gorbachev meeting. There will also be direct broadcasts of contacts between the Americans and the Russians."

Press conferences? Advertisements in major Western newspapers? Interviews with officials? The Soviets evidently will stop at nothing.

The Rand study of deception paints a similar picture of a world awash in lies and deceit, a world in which events are shaped not by the truth, but by distortions of it.

The bibliography cites among its 915 entries: a Roman study of military deception, written in 90 A.D. by Sextus Julius Frontinus; an investigation of why the French underestimated German strength before the invasion of the Rhineland in 1688; a discussion of deception written by Frederick the Great in

1747; an analysis of the role of propaganda in the American Revolution in 1776.

The bibliography even cites examples of deception in nature: female Photuris fireflies, for example, that prey on males of other species by mimicking the flash responses of that species' females. And there is a study from American Naturalist about "misinformation" and natural selection.

The Rand collection also notes the classic deception ploys (the "bodyguard of lies" that Secretary of State George Shultz referred to last week) that helped the Allies to win World War II: the elaborate "Double-Cross" system that fed German agents false intelligence to corroborate Allied deceptions and the case of "The Man Who Never Was," in which the British dressed up a corpse so that he would appear to be a British major who had died in a plane crash while carrying secret (and false) invasion plans.

What's striking about the Rand study is how few of the examples of successful deception operations involve the United States. There is a simple explanation for that absence. Americans, God bless us, aren't very good at deception. As a people, we lack many of the necessary skills: subtlety, patience, a capacity for sustained hypocrisy and deceit. Lacking these essential skills, when we try our hand at deception stratagems, we tend to make a mess of it. The proponents of the Libya disinformation campaign, for example, couldn't even get their alibis straight.

The proponents of deception are fond of quoting the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, who wrote in the 5th century B.C. that "All warfare is based on deception." They seem to ignore another passage by Sun Tzu on the importance of understanding your own society and its limitations.

"Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril," wrote Sun Tzu. "If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril."

The Reagan administration may have understood Libya when it planned last August's campaign of disinformation. But it certainly didn't understand America.